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► To cite this version:

Patrick Petitjean. UNESCO and the International Union for History of Science. Petitjean, P., Zharov, V., Glaser, G., Richardson, J., de Padirac, B. and Archibald, G. (eds). Sixty Years of Sciences at Unesco, 1945-2005, Unesco, pp.81-82, 2006. halshs-00166672

HAL Id: halshs-00166672

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00166672>

Submitted on 8 Aug 2007

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UNESCO and the creation of the International Union of History of Science

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For Joseph Needham the history of science was a way of showing that “there are few peoples or nations that have not contributed, even if to different degrees, to humanity’s scientific heritage.”¹ As the first head of UNESCO's Natural Sciences Section, Needham wanted to break down the barriers of narrow nationalism and cultural bias. This, he believed, was part of “UNESCO’s task of enhancing international comprehension and understanding.”²

But Needham also wanted to break down the barriers of the human intellect. As an academic subject, the history of science had traditionally favored the first discipline over the latter: all across the world, the history of science has been studied in the social sciences and humanities departments of universities. As an expert in both fields, Needham sought a dynamic synthesis of history and science. This was the impetus behind the creation of the International Union of History of Science (IUHS) in 1947.

The Union's precursor, the “International Academy of the History of Science” was founded two decades earlier, in 1927. A rather elitist group, its members were mostly scholars focused on history. The Academy organized the International Congresses of the History of Science (ICHS) of which the second was the most famous. It took place in London in 1931 in the presence of a Soviet Delegation headed by Nikolai Bukharin. This congress launched a social approach to the history of science, which greatly influenced British scientists, instigators of the movement to study the social relations of science. Young Joseph Needham participated actively in the second ICHS. It marked the beginning of his enduring commitment to the history of science.

Discussions in June 1946 on UNESCO’s future scientific programme included the proposition for an Institute of History of Science to enhance the already existing Academy. In December of that year, it was finally decided that a whole body should be created, one that would be attached to the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU). Armando Cortesao, member of the Academy, was recruited by UNESCO (Section of Sciences) to set it up.

This Union became a reality in October 1947 when, at the fifth ICHS, in Lausanne, Cortesao presented the UNESCO project and the rationale behind the Organization’s involvement in the field of study: scientific research must be linked to the history of science and vice versa. The IUHS automatically became a member of ICSU. If, within ICSU, there was some displeasure about IUHS's membership, it was rapidly overcome. Cortesao worked with the IUHS for the first few months and, during 1947-1948, UNESCO assumed a major part of its finances. Cortesao then joined the Division of ‘philosophy and civilizations’ to lead the “Scientific and Cultural History of Mankind” Project. Jean Pelseneer, also a member of the Academy, then joined UNESCO’s Natural Science Section in order to edit the “International Archives of History of Science”, again with financial support from the

¹ Cortesao (1947), p.35

² Cortesao (1947), p.33

Organization. He, too, participated in the “Scientific and Cultural History of Mankind” project.

The fact that the IUHS was a part of ICSU and not of the International Social Science Council was a clear break with scholarly tradition. In liaison with the Social Relations Commission of ICSU and UNESCO’s Science Section, the IUHS established, at the outset, a commission charged with the “History of Social Relations of Science,” chaired by the physicist Léon Rosenfeld. UNESCO requested a report from the commission on the “Social Aspects of the History of Science” which Samuel Lilley finalized. The report’s central theme was that contexts (social, economic, intellectual, political) facilitated or blocked scientific discoveries without changing the overall direction that scientific progress takes.

Eventually, a "P" was added to the Union's title, creating The International Union of History and Philosophy of Science (IUPHS). The original name may have changed but, after six decades, the Union's mission remains the same.

Sources:

Armando Cortesao, "L'Unesco, sa tâche et son but concernant les sciences et leur développement historique", in *Actes du Ve Congrès International d'Histoire des Sciences*, 1947, Lausanne, pp.25-35

Samuel Lilley, "Social Aspects of the History of Science", in *Archives Internationales d'Histoire des Sciences*, 1949, 2, pp.376-443